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UNIVERSITIES AND

COLLEGES —

*Religion*

# WHAT IS RELIGIOUS PLURALISM



*a look  
at the  
multi-religious  
state university  
of today  
and an  
explanation of  
what can be  
the only working  
policy to  
keep religion free  
and vital  
on the  
campus*

## FOREWORD

DR. HENRY E. ALLEN, co-ordinator of students' religious activities at the University of Minnesota, is *persona grata* with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. He is largely responsible for formulating policy whereby Lutheran student groups and their spiritual advisers can vigorously participate in the program of campus religious councils. The "Minnesota Plan," based on the recognition of religious pluralism, has become normative for other state universities.

One of the events leading up to a critical re-evaluation of the religious situation at the University of Minnesota in the post-World War II era was the verbal harrassment of Gamma Delta delegates at a student council of religion meeting where an all-Protestant worship program was being planned. The Lutheran delegates, on stating that conscience did not permit them to join in unionistic worship services, were branded "narrow-minded" by some of the participants. On receiving this report, Gamma Delta announced its withdrawal from the council.

It was at this point that Dr. Allen went into action, stating in hour-long conversations with pastoral advisers that *all* religious groups, also those not of the Protestant majority but affiliated with Roman Catholicism, Christian Science, and other so-called minority groups, had equal rights on campus. Gamma Delta reconsidered its resignation and, at Dr. Allen's suggestion, provided the chairman for a meeting at which the constitution of the student council of religion was re-written. The outcome was a working policy providing not only for interreligious exchanges, a program of common interests, and joint service projects but also for the preservation and nurture of the distinctive religious heritage of each group. Excluded from projects sponsored in the name of the council were joint worship services heretofore held on a "least common denominator" basis.

By endorsing the principle of religious pluralism as the only one consistent with the nature of a publicly-supported state university, Dr. Allen opened the door to a new way of life for students' religious groups on campus. This principle was further enunciated at the first consultative conference of "Religion in the State University," held at the University of Minnesota in fall of 1949. Dr. Allen and Dean Edmund G. Williamson of the University of Minnesota were chiefly responsible for the success of this historic meeting.

The Commission on College and University Work of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has played an active leadership role in promulgating the rightful place of religion at state universities under the "religious pluralism" principle. It has been creatively involved in all consultative conferences bringing together university administrators, faculty, and national religious leaders. It is because of our concurring conviction that we present this message by Dr. Allen.

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## What Is Religious Pluralism?

WHY SHOULD it be necessary to explain or defend religious pluralism in American universities when actually our whole concept of freedom of worship in the United States presupposes a multi-religious community? If you are not favoring one religion or church (enjoined in the first amendment to our federal constitution as "establishment of religion"), you are accepting religious pluralism—the right of any individual (or group) to worship however he may choose, or not at all. The only other option is the Soviet solution, which is to outlaw all religions or to permit propaganda privileges only to the foes of faith.

Yet the prevailing pattern of religious practice on American campuses has until recent years seemed to discredit, if not contradict, this basic presupposition chartered by our founding fathers. Higher education was nurtured in its beginnings by Protestant Christians who took an almost paternal responsibility to make sure that students practiced the "true" faith. But with the growth of these early colleges into large institutions, allegiance to the churches and creeds that brought them into being was gradually denied. Nevertheless, church-related colleges maintained just enough polite lip-service to the conventions of their spiritual heritage to make persons brought up in divergent faiths feel unwelcome.

### The "Church College" Image

Then, with the founding of universities supported by taxes, how easy it was for the same pattern to be perpetuated that was found in the church-denying, once-Protestant institutions! Vestigial forms of worship, chapels after the manner of the majority constituency, and Bible courses were frequently sponsored without any sense of incongruity by colleges and universities which had been brought into existence by the state with tax money derived from all the people. Here again the non-majority faiths felt out of place. And when extreme secularism gained predominance on many campuses, the betrayal of the founding fathers became complete. Now not even the faith of the majority constituency was given any recognition. Thus the perversion has come about that, in a nation which prides itself on its superiority to Sovietism, we are caught in policies which place the "not wanted" label on religion, all because we have not followed the precepts of our free society in welcoming all faiths and living with differences that enrich our culture and self-understanding.

The situation is so serious that many observers wonder whether meaningful religious faith can survive in the university climate, surcharged, as it often is, with prejudice based on misinformation and ignorance regarding

the function and purpose of religion in our way of life. Even more discouraging are the haphazard and archaic efforts being attempted by religion's protagonists in meeting the challenges posed by indifference or preoccupation with material gains. The solution, in the view of many, lies in transferring the church-college image to state universities.

Now, let it not be thought for a moment that I am belittling the role of the church-related college which is taking seriously its responsibility to maintain an atmosphere of reverence for the divine as it pursues goals of the highest scholarship in its classrooms and laboratories. Such institutions, solidly supported by their respective churches, must reaffirm their purposes and their right to exist. There is a rightful existence quite distinct from non-denominational colleges, both public and private, which are carrying the burden of educating the great bulk of student enrollments. Every right and encouragement should be accorded the church-loyal college to select such students for admission as share their commitment to the creeds and concepts of the sponsoring church. Singleness of faith—as distinct from pluralism—is not only in order, but to be commended and encouraged. Here are the seed-beds of loyalty to high purposes, to acceptance of the primacy of the spirit. Let there be no departure from this dedication. When such institutions seek to be all things to all people, reducing to a whisper the affirmation of their high and distinctive aims, they lose respect, not only in their own eyes but in the eyes of all higher education.

No, it is in the non-church-related college or university, which accepts students and benefactions from all sections of society, that the religious situation must be viewed with much apprehension. Why? The fact is that men and women who represent religion professionally on these campuses have in the great majority of cases been trained theologically to understand only their own faith traditions and to devote themselves single-mindedly to the advancement of views—conservative or liberal—propounded by the scholars of their own particular background. They have not been taught to understand and appreciate what in the light of our national constitution is the legitimacy of beliefs which deviate far from their own. They are apt to have little realization of the multi-denominational campus and of the attitude which regards religion as irrelevant to the pursuits of contemporary scholarship.

### Religion Returns to the State University

Since the end of World War I there has developed an awareness among administrators of non-church-related colleges and universities that something was missing, that the vacuum left by abandoning chapel assemblies and curricular offerings in Biblical and ecclesiastical studies

was not being filled. Some denominational bodies simultaneously recognized that higher education in general was sloughing off its responsibility for the religious nurture of its students. Their church boards of education, few of whom had first-hand acquaintance with any phase of secular higher education, sought to alert their congregations in campus neighborhoods to the needs of students and faculty which might differ from those of non-academic parishioners. Organizations, such as the Y.M.C.A., the Y.W.C.A., and the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, sought in their own non-ecclesiastical way to voice the claims of religion in terms meaningful to young people whose intellectual lives were in a state of high stimulation. Then came the establishment of denominational religious "foundations."

B'Nai B'Rith Hillel Foundations, begun at Illinois, spread across the land to both coasts. Virtually every Protestant body formulated a pattern, sometimes a campus church, sometimes simply a student organization. These groups, whether housed in their own building or not, stressed fellowship, Bible study, and worship. Supervision came from an adviser or director, whose status *vis-a-vis* his own fellow clergy was poorly defined and seldom an enviable one in his denomination prestige-wise. After World War II many Roman Catholic bishops, taking note of the presence of scores of thousands of Catholic students—usually without church approval, gave encouragement to the organization of Newman Centers. The realization dawned that there was no more strategic spot for the enlightened ministrations of the church than on these campuses, for here the cast and direction of America's future leadership were being determined.

### The Whole Gamut of Religions

Nearly every religion, denomination, and sect is represented in the student bodies of non-church-related colleges and universities. The administration which feels it can provide spiritual nurture to the dozens of faith affiliations is deceiving itself, unless, of course, it is willing to spend money on chaplains' services as does the federal government on behalf of the armed services. Apart from the alternative of disregarding the values represented by religion and religious freedom altogether, the only answer is to utilize intelligently and appreciatively the resources provided by religious bodies and to assist them in every way possible to perform their services in a manner which will reduce needless mental conflict and promote the best interests of scholarship.

In shouldering such responsibilities the churches themselves benefit from the association their campus representatives have with intellectual leaders. Far from regarding secular higher education as their enemy, churches desire to lend their assistance toward the de-

velopment of the total person. On the academic side, it is a distortion of the true meaning of the separation of church and state to imply that the church has no legitimate place in individual and group life or that its attempt to minister to the needs of its adherents on campus is an improper function.

So we have our many religious organizations and their pastoral advisers on the present-day campus. There are still a few administrations which have not awakened to the potential value of these priests, pastors, and rabbis, trying to keep them at arm's length in controversion of America's tradition of freedom for religious diversity and of the practice of religious pluralism. But campuses, especially in the mid-west or the Mississippi Valley area, which are aware of benefits received from land-grant college legislation, are offering ever greater cordiality to these spiritual counselors and advisers. This is done because it is recognized that skillful ministers do much to enrich the quality of campus life by helping students to resolve seeming contradictions between their church's creed and the new knowledge gleaned from classroom and laboratory. These clergymen do not set themselves in opposition to the goals of science but rather assist students to put scientific knowledge into its proper perspective.

With respectful relationships between church representatives and university authorities being worked out, what can be said of the relationship of religious workers to each other in this pluralistic setting? Unfortunately, there are still instances characterized by competition, rivalry, and even hostility. Here is where a deficiency in theological preparation becomes most painfully apparent, namely, the lack of inter-religious good manners. If the multiplicity of ministries is to be welcomed in institutions of secular education, the pluralistic approach must not be surcharged with controversy, name-calling, or "dog eat dog" behavior. In fact, a campus such as the University of Minnesota makes it quite plain, through the rules of its faculty senate committee on student affairs, that any group's privilege to function as a campus organization implies friendly and co-operative association with other bodies, whatever be their theological presuppositions. A council of student religious organizations is established for the purpose of convenient communication between the campus and the many agencies of religion. Parallel to it is the council of religious advisers whose status is highly respected because of help mutually rendered and constructive services extended to campus life in general.

### **The Protestant Majority Cannot Rule**

A religious worker who is assigned to a state university campus without previous experience in a pluralistic environment may have to learn the hard way to partici-

pate in deliberations which do not follow the procedures of his accustomed denominational activities. If he finds, as is often the case, that many of his colleagues represent a majority Protestant position, he may wonder why, with a majority of votes, there cannot be adopted a position which his dissident fellow workers would be bound to accept as the will of the majority and thus conform to it. But here is where the true meaning of pluralism — the right to freedom of conscience — comes into such sharp relief. What is at issue is that all citizens (and all students as well) have the right to believe, worship, and practice their own faith without intimidation or pressure to conform to majority patterns.

In this connection, a word may be said concerning movements toward Christian unity, movements to which the adjective "ecumenical" is applied, sometimes accurately, sometimes in misleading fashion. If the entire world of Christendom were to involve itself in genuine attempts to bring together all Christian groups — Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Liberal, Conservative — such efforts would do justice to the word "ecumenical" in its sense of universality. But too often the term is used to describe a closing of the ranks among the major Reformed Protestant bodies as a counter force to Roman Catholicism. The inability to enter into patient and forbearing dialogue with representatives of Rome brings into grave doubt the propriety of using the adjective "ecumenical" in such a fragmentary sense. For the foreseeable outcome is simply to substitute in place of many small divisive fissures one wide, unbridgeable abyss between those Christians who accept Roman primacy and those who do not.

Criticisms are sometimes leveled at the type of inter-religious council found on a growing number of state university campuses, criticisms which say that the inclusion of every shade of faith groups will lead us down the dangerous path of syncretism. In another form, they say that by admitting a Unitarian, a Christian Scientist, a Moslem, or a Buddhist group, one is encouraging acceptance of the notion that "one religion is as good as another," or, as a militant missionary has described it, is selling out to "creeping Buddhism." Now, the point which is missed by these critics, be they Catholic or pan-Protestant, is that such inclusive councils make no effort to achieve a "common" theology. In fact, every participant is assured that he will not be embarrassed by holding to a minority position. It is stressed that any policy or project undertaken under council impetus will not be permitted to use the council's name if any single member-group feels that its conscience would be compromised by being associated with the venture. In this way is the minority right safeguarded and vitality given to a genuine acceptance of pluralism as a principle guiding the association of religiously minded people.

## **The "M" Menaces: Mammon and Marxism**

In a day when every religion or faith is confronted by the twin menaces of indifference and materialistic preoccupation there must be reappraisals of where each of us stands in relation to other spiritual enterprises in meeting the common foes, be they the worldliness of Hollywood on the one hand, or the Kremlin on the other. A wise writer from the Christian Church in Ceylon has likened the world's preoccupation with the cults of Mammon and Marxism to a debilitating disease which threatens, through its seductive teachings, to make mankind believe that animal appetites alone are important, that man *can* live by bread alone. Such degradation of the human spirit is intolerable to every religion predicated on the primacy of the eternal. Neither Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam nor the Judeo-Christian theologies can yield to a doctrine which denies and ridicules the sanctity of the individual personality, or insists that no truths and satisfactions are to be found beyond fleshly pleasures of the physical world, or which supplants the "there and then" with the "here and now." To minister to human beings confronted by soul-destroying philosophies is the task of all religions everywhere. Each faith has its pharmacopoeia which it calls upon to halt the advance of these sinister plagues.

## **Religious Convictions Not Surrendered, Religious Freedom Enjoyed**

This metaphorical picture illustrates beautifully the need and basis for an inter-religious confederation. Here is indicated no relinquishing of conviction, no mixing of all religions into one, no advocacy of joint worship amid dissident doctrinal symbols. What is asserted under "religious pluralism" is the right of every religious group to have its hearing and the opportunity to consult together in areas of common concern.

With religions it is extremely difficult to make classifications and gradations satisfactory to all. It is a very touchy business to phrase creeds in behalf of others and catch all the nuances. These are matters of private judgment. Each believer is and must be convinced of the ultimate verity of his own faith. With our acceptance of religious pluralism as the principle characterizing the American tradition, we cannot have it and do not want to have it any other way.

It is this kind of pattern which is developing on large American university campuses. May we prayerfully urge that our church and synagogue groups, large or small, lend encouragement to this kind of joint functioning, secure in the realization that no surrender of cherished convictions is involved? Under the banner of religious pluralism religious workers on campus, though they may profoundly disagree with each other's convictions, can respect the quality of mutual dedication and enjoy the freedom of their own religion. The way of life followed in the recognition of religious pluralism is a declaration of the relevance of religion to higher education.